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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 001038

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SEVENTH FLEET FOR VADM GREENERT  
OSD FOR OSD/ISA (STERN AND POWERS)  
PACOM FOR FPA HUSO

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF CDR SEVENTH FLEET VADM GREENERT

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

#### SUMMARY

1. (C) Admiral Greenert, your visit to Bangkok and Phuket will come as we are winding down the critical U.S. military role in providing assistance to Thailand and the other tsunami-hit nations in the region. Your meetings with senior

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Thai officials follow on the heels of visits by a number of senior Americans -- then-Secretary of State Powell, Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz and Admiral Fargo -- and will

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allow you to echo the theme of their visits: the United States remains engaged in Southeast Asia and is committed to our treaty obligations here. Your staff talks will allow you to drive home a key lesson learned: the quick ramping up of our regional hub at Utaapao Royal Thai Navy Air Base and our military's ability to interact rapidly with Thai counterparts is a direct result of decades of joint combined exercises, training and cooperation between Thailand and the United States. While strong on the eve of the tsunami, our combined experience over the past six weeks has only enhanced our links and relations with Thai civilian and military leaders. You can also discuss with your Thai Navy counterparts the extent of the damage caused to the Thai Navy base at Phang Nga, Thailand's primary facility on the Andaman Sea, and explore ways we can improve links between our navies. By pointing out the quick combined response to the tsunami made by USN and Thai SEALs, you can underscore the benefits of Special Forces training. End Summary

#### TSUNAMI AFTERMATH

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2. (U) The massive rescue and recovery operation undertaken by the U.S. military as a result of the December 26 tsunami is historic. Mercifully, U.S. casualties are much lighter than those suffered by other countries. Thousands of Thai, Europeans and other Asians were killed in the Phuket area -- a haven for vacationers during the holiday season. Total fatalities continue to rise -- Thai officials privately say they expect the final death toll to top 8,000. One of the most devastated areas in Thailand was the Phang Nga Naval Base. Phang Nga represents the only strategic naval facility on Thailand's west coast. Pier facilities, the water treatment plant, barracks and communications capabilities were badly damaged by the tsunami. Additionally, a patrol boat was sunk and a frigate was beached by the tsunami. We have provided a technical assessment to the Thai suggesting ways to salvage the frigate. The RTN has indicated, however, that it will undertake the salvage itself. Locating, identifying and processing the remains of victims of the tragedy is a key focus of U.S. efforts. The RTG has shown us and the international community that they are taking careful steps to identify and preserve bodies.

#### USG RELIEF ASSISTANCE

3. (C) U.S. disaster relief efforts, led by the U.S. military, have had an immediate impact on affected areas in Thailand. III MEF Commander, USMC Lt. Gen. Robert Blackman, is the commanding general of Combined Support Force 536 (CSF 536), currently based out of Utaapao Royal Thai Naval Air Base. CSF 536 worked closely with the Embassy and JUSMAGTHAI to ensure that requests for assistance were promptly addressed and to assist coordination of relief from civilian agencies, NGOs and corporate donors. The Royal Thai Armed Forces granted the U.S. military blanket overflight clearances for relief operations in the region, including for aircraft from the USS Abraham Lincoln battle group which operated off Sumatra. In addition to permitting our use of Utaapao, the Royal Thai Government integrated Thai officers into the CSF staff where needed. During the height of operations, over 1800 USG personnel operated out of Utaapao. We distributed over 660,000 pounds of supplies within Thailand including medicine, food, dry ice and body bags. USAF C-130s made regular delivery runs from Utaapao and

Bangkok to affected areas for time sensitive supplies while bulk shipments tended to go overland. USN P-3s positioned at Utapao conducted search and rescue missions in the vicinity of Thailand and in the region. Teams made up of medical specialists from the CDC, the Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Science and the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Hawaii were also deployed to Thailand to assist with victim identification. U.S. Navy SEALs and a representative from the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance worked closely with Thai military units to search for the remains of American and other victims of the disaster. Embassy Bangkok provided 24-hour American Citizens Services for weeks after the crisis, and the Embassy maintains a team in Phuket and other devastated locations to assist Americans, claim Amcit remains and coordinate USG relief efforts. USDAO Bangkok frequently flew C-12 missions responding to specific taskings and to provide an immediate assessment of the disaster situation. The aircraft also enabled Embassy and visiting VIPs to obtain an orientation from the air and to meet on the ground with local officials coordinating relief.

14. (C) CSF 536's concept of operations set up Utapao as the hub for U.S. relief efforts bound for Sri Lanka, Thailand and Indonesia. In each of those countries, Combined Support Groups (CSG) were established to interact with the local government, the U.S. Embassies and the NGO community. CSG-Thailand was based in Phuket and redeployed on January 22. Since that time, ongoing recovery efforts in Thailand are being managed by the Embassy and JUSMAGTHAI. A key part of those efforts is to focus civil affairs projects carried out under our military exercise authority in Thailand to assist Thais rebuilding in the devastated areas around Phuket. We are excited about the COMREL and Project Handclasp efforts you plan to undertake during the USS Blue Ridge's visit to Phuket later this month as well as similar activities during future ship visits as they will mesh well with our overall tsunami assistance efforts.

#### RESPONSE BY THE SEALs

15. (C) One of the most visible examples of U.S. military assistance to Thailand came in the form of SEAL teams immediately helping in the body recovery effort. It should be noted that these SEALs were not attached to CSF 536 in the days after the tsunami struck, they were in Thailand for a previously scheduled UNDERSEAL combined training exercise. With assistance from JUSMAGTHAI, they quickly redeployed to assist relief work. The effort was highly visible, linked in the Thai media to our efforts under the CSF 536 umbrella and well received. In fact, Prime Minister Thaksin asked to accompany the crews on January 7 and was shown on national TV thanking the SEALs for their assistance. The public relations benefit of such opportunities to demonstrate the advantages of our bilateral military relationship are obvious.

#### OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING LINKS WITH THE THAI NAVY

16. (C) Historically, we have had much closer links with the Royal Thai Army and Royal Thai Air Force than we have had with the Royal Thai Navy. The RTN is the smallest part of the Thai military and suffers from budget constraints. In recent years, the RTN has purchased Chinese equipment, leading some analysts to conclude that China is attempting to improve its links to the Thai military through the Thai Navy. Meanwhile, the RTN is searching for a mission. In recent months, PACOM has worked with the Thai Navy trying to win RTN support for the Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI) and support for anti-piracy efforts aimed at the Strait of Malacca and elsewhere. In 1997, Thailand purchased from Spain the VSTOL carrier Chakri Nareubet. At the time, the RTN indicated they would use the ship as an emergency relief vessel. Since then, all but one of her Harriers has been rendered inoperable.

17. (C) During his January visit to Thailand, ADM Fargo suggested to the Royal Thai Supreme Command that using the Chakri Nareubet as a helicopter carrier might make more sense. Senior Thai officials liked the idea and asked for assistance in training Thai helicopter pilots to operate off the carrier. In conjunction with disaster relief efforts, continuous daytime embarked helicopter operations were conducted from the Chakri Nareubet for six weeks. In addition to these operations, the carrier conducted search and rescue, remains recovery and medical support missions to tsunami-devastated Phi Phi island. This deployment

SIPDIS represented the longest such operation ever performed in the ship's brief history. (Note: In May 2004, the USN demonstrated for the Ministry of Defense missions and capabilities of the USS Essex (LHD-2) as a model for the Chakri Nareubet's use. End Note.) In light of the tsunami, it might be fruitful to discuss with your RTN counterparts joint exercises that could further enhance the RTN's ability to respond to a disaster and to use their carrier more

effectively. In the past, RTN officials have asked American counterparts for assistance in acquiring new Harriers. If you receive such a query, we suggest you remind your interlocutors that our Harriers are committed now and we do not expect to have any available for Thailand.

18. (C) The Cooperative Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise continues to be the RTN's premiere exercise with the USN. This year's exercise will focus on RMSI themes while maintaining proficiency in traditional surface warfare tactics. This is an encouraging sign that the RTN wishes to improve bilateral cooperation. While here, you may want to encourage the RTN to participate in multi-lateral exercises. Traditionally, Thailand has been reluctant to participate in multi-lateral exercises such as the Southeast Asia Cooperation Anti-terrorism event (SEACAT). The Embassy believes that SEACAT represents the best opportunity to improve communications and interoperability among navies in the region.

19. (C) As mentioned above, USN SEALs operated heroically during the tsunami relief effort. Our SEALs have extensive links with their RTN counterparts and train together regularly. However, Thai Special Forces in general, and RTN SEALs in particular, do not have a patron on the senior command staff to support their training. It would be useful for you to flag the mutual benefits of having our SEALs and other special forces working closely together.

10. (C) Another issue you might want to raise is our desire to help the RTN improve facilities at Utapao. A number of systems, including Utapao's antiquated air traffic control and radar systems should be upgraded. JUSMAGTHAI is working with PACOM to identify a number of projects which will make Utapao a more useful facility. In a similar vein, we understand that the RTN might receive supplemental funding to upgrade some assets in the wake of the tsunami. You may wish to probe your interlocutors on this point and remind them that U.S. equipment has been consistently validated on the high seas and in combat.

11. (U) In 2004, twenty-four U.S. Navy ships visited Thailand, calling on either Phuket or Sattahip. The visits by USN/USMC personnel in conjunction with these ship visits has added a boost to Thailand's economy, which was buffeted by the Bali bombings, SARS and the Asian Bird Flu epidemic. Our resumption of ship visits following an easing of threat concerns in the south of the country led to the return to Phuket of third country navies as well. The Thai business community fully supports these visits, while law enforcement is very proactive in ensuring Force Protection requirements are either met or exceeded. In light of the tsunami-related devastation to the Phuket area, future ship visits are seen by the Thais as a symbol of the island's recovery from the disaster.

#### VIOLENCE IN THE SOUTH

12. (C) Besides dealing with the tsunami aftermath, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's biggest domestic challenge is the unsettled security situation in the southern part of the country. Southern Thailand, and in particular the three southernmost Muslim majority provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, has experienced episodic violence since it was incorporated into the Siamese Kingdom in 1902. However, last year witnessed a dramatic increase in the level of violence, with over 500 people killed either by militants or by security forces. Local Muslim separatist militants have attacked symbols of Thai and Buddhist authority, and there continue to be almost daily incidents of violence, notably even after the tsunami disaster of December 26. Attacks most often involve isolated shootings of local officials, although increasingly sophisticated bombing attacks have become more common. While there is no credible evidence of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) or al-Qaeda direction of the violence, there is concern that they might attempt to exploit the local violence for their own purposes.

13. (C) Thaksin has recently acknowledged that the problem in Thailand's south is not simply the work of criminal gangs as he once declared, and is an issue that potentially reaches beyond Thailand's borders. Last December, Thaksin claimed publicly during a radio address that Thai militants are training in Malaysia and that Indonesian extremists are instigating some of the violence. This rather clumsy public assertion apparently deeply offended the two fellow ASEAN governments. That said, Thaksin is not likely to ask for direct U.S. assistance as the RTG maintains that the southern situation is primarily a "domestic" issue. Reporting has consistently pointed out that this violence is directed strictly at RTG institutions with no evidence of attacks directed towards foreign or U.S. interests. Additional reporting shows no migration of the violence north from the aforementioned southern provinces. In your meeting, Thai officials may ask you for U.S. equipment and technology such as UAVs to support efforts to monitor militant movements in

the south. We recommend you be receptive but noncommittal, and suggest that technical experts follow up. At the same time, Thaksin -- and most Thais -- are sensitive about any perception that the U.S. wants to establish a security presence in the south.

#### MILITARY COOPERATION

14. (C) We conduct a wide range of major exercises and training programs with Thailand each year, including Cobra Gold, the annual exercise which in 2004 involved approximately 13,500 U.S. service members and 6,000 Thais. Cobra Gold 2005 will be smaller than last year, primarily due to U.S. commitments elsewhere and the large number of U.S. forces sent to the region for tsunami relief. Nonetheless, planning for Cobra Gold 2005 is underway; we expect this year's exercise to be a disaster response training program involving several thousand U.S. troops. Utapao, currently being used as the primary staging area for U.S. disaster relief efforts in the region, is a critical support hub for U.S. aircraft transiting the region. Over 420 DoD aircraft use it each year. From January 25 until February 4, we conducted our largest air exercise with the Thai, Cope Tiger. This year, F-18's from the USS Abraham Lincoln participated.

#### THAILAND AND IRAQ

15. (C) Thailand sent troops to Afghanistan as part of OEF and dispatched two deployments to Iraq as part of OIF. In December 2003, two Thai soldiers were killed by a car bomb while on duty in Karbala. Thailand's second six-month deployment of 443 medics and engineers to Iraq ended in September 2004. Notably, despite RTG sensitivity to the prospect, participation in OIF did not cause a domestic furor in Thailand as in other countries. It would be appropriate for you to thank the Thai for their contribution to OIF and OEF. Washington has asked us to monitor Thai receptiveness to making another deployment to Iraq. During your visit, you may want to ask senior Thai officials whether they expect Thailand to send more troops to support OIF.

BOYCE